

VZCZCXYZ0000  
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHLP #0561/01 0722046  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 122046Z MAR 08  
FM AMEMBASSY LA PAZ  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6798  
INFO RUEHAC/AMEMBASSY ASUNCION PRIORITY 7706  
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 5062  
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 8974  
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 6195  
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 3408  
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 3629  
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO PRIORITY 5327  
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 6031  
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 0661  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RUCQSD/USSOCOM SORTS MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 000561

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/07/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [BO](#)  
SUBJECT: SANTA CRUZ: NO TURNING BACK AUTONOMY

REF: A. LA PAZ 445

[1](#)B. LA PAZ 182

[1](#)C. LA PAZ 483

Classified By: ECOPOL Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Santa Cruz Departmental Electoral Court is moving forward with plans to hold the May 4 referendum on the autonomy statute, ignoring an order from the National Electoral Court to cease and desist. Given that the referendum is being financed by the Santa Cruz Prefecture, there is little the Bolivian government can do to stop it without resorting to force. Santa Cruz leaders and citizens are convinced that "We WILL be autonomous" although what that will mean come May 5 is still a big question, particularly because the Department could be cut off from central government resources as punishment. Renewed calls for dialogue ring hollow, so the government and "media luna" departments continue on their parallel paths with little chance for any change until after May 4.

Just Try and Stop Us  
-----

[1](#)2. (C) Preparations for the May 4 referendum on Santa Cruz's draft autonomy statute had been well underway when the National Electoral Court (CNE) called a March 6-7 meeting to "reconcile" the calendars for the departmental autonomy referenda and the national referendum on the draft constitution. After Congress passed highly-controversial laws February 28, outlawing referenda not called for by Congress and setting the constitutional referendum for the same May 4 date (ref A), Santa Cruz leaders discussed moving the autonomy vote up a week or two to keep the issues separate. The CNE, however, ordered that all referenda be postponed. The Santa Cruz Departmental Electoral Court (CDE) refused to recognize that order, saying it had not agreed to such a scenario during the March 6-7 meeting, and vowed to continue with the May 4 referendum as planned. Technically, there is little the CNE can do to stop it without resorting to force, since the referendum is being financed by the Santa Cruz Prefecture.

It's Legal and Moral  
-----

¶3. (C) Members of the Santa Cruz CDE told American Presence Post Officer (APP) they expected there would be consequences. They were elected by a 2/3 vote of Congress, and although no one has ever questioned their impartiality, they could be replaced by a 2/3 vote of Congress, something the government has in the recent past been able to forcibly orchestrate. Nonetheless, they pointed out that their decision to proceed is not only legal under the current electoral law (disregarding the "illegitimate" February 28th laws), it is morally correct. 110,000 Bolivians who signed a petition have a right to vote. They further stressed that May 4 will be the culmination of a long-term effort to win autonomy and the result of many, many years of dissatisfaction with central government rule. It is important to remember, they said, that this is not simply an anti-Evo strategy, although the actions of the Morales government resulted in increased momentum. As an example, a civic committee member told APO that routes for public transportation are set in La Paz. Local officials cannot even act to satisfy demands for bus services in neighborhoods. Comment: APP had requested a meeting with the President of the Santa Cruz CDE to learn about the referendum process, and was surprised to find all 9 members of the court present. This indicated the seriousness and unity with which the court is working. End comment.

We WILL Be Autonomous  
-----

¶4. (C) Secretary General of the Santa Cruz Prefecture Roly Aguilera told APP the coming months will be very tense. The Bolivian government is extremely frustrated with its inability to control what is happening. Santa Cruz leaders expect Morales' MAS party will work hard to provoke violent confrontations around the referendum, importing thugs if need be. Aguilera admitted it will be difficult to control violence between opposing groups of citizens, but civic leaders were sending out messages of restraint to all supporters of autonomy. They hope the experience of Cochabamba, Pando and Sucre, where the government's use of "social mobilizations" to provoke violence backfired, will have some moderating effect as well.

International Reaction?  
-----

¶5. (C) Interlocutors in both the prefecture and the civic committee said the international community's reaction would be extremely important. Local leaders are very concerned about what the international community's "complicit silence" after the undemocratic actions on February 28 may indicate. They understand the U.S. is constrained by its difficult relationship with the Morales government, but they expected the EU to stand up for democratic principles. However, what bothers them most is the solicitous attitude of Brazil and Argentina to President Morales, an attitude which ignores that the "media luna" is the source of most of the trade between their countries. (They hinted that the sole gas pipeline to Brazil could become a target of any radicalized, dissatisfied group.) As a result, the prefects plan to increase their own "diplomatic efforts" to neighboring countries. On the other hand, our interlocutors saw some benefits in what happened on February 28. "Every error, every illegal act that the government commits makes our case for autonomy stronger."

The Boy Who Cried Wolf  
-----

¶6. (C) Renewed calls for dialogue by President Morales and Vice President Garcia Linera the week of March 10 were met with incredulity by opposition leaders. There were endless rounds of fruitless dialogue during the past three months, with both sides talking past each other. And when on February 28 VP Garcia Linera was "in dialogue" with the opposition and left them to preside over a session in Congress, while they could not participate because the building was surrounded by thugs, the last ounce of credibility was destroyed. As the OAS's Dante Caputo arrives

this week to facilitate dialogue, the OAS has to overcome credibility problems with the opposition due to OAS SYG Insulza's public comments in favor of the Morales government during his January visit (ref B). Like the boy who cried wolf, these latest calls for dialogue come after too many false alarms.

The Day After?

17. (C) With little doubt that the autonomy referendum will go forward, and will pass, the big question is what will happen the day after? Where will the region get the resources to implement its own projects and govern itself, particularly if the central government cuts off funds to the department as punishment? Will imposing new taxes on its citizens be enough? Santa Cruz leaders are clear that autonomy does not mean independence, as western Bolivia provides the market for 50 percent of what the east produces. Some predict a civic war; others fear repression (an unlikely scenario given that the armed forces will be hesitant to act-ref C). One earnest if naive interlocutor in the civic committee told APP, "I hope it means that sometime in May, President Morales will wake up and realize he is in a different country than the one he had planned. I hope it means he starts acting like the president of ALL Bolivians and makes moves to reconcile the country." Along this line, even the harshest critics of the Morales administration in Santa Cruz believe the president must finish his term. "We must prove that our drive for autonomy is not an attempt to drive him from office, but simply to govern ourselves better. We must get rid of the labels he has given us."

Comment:

18. (C) The forward momentum on the autonomy referendum appears almost impossible to stop. The recent clumsy moves by Morales have only served to strengthen the pro-autonomy movement. It seems unlikely that even international mediation will be able to stop this train. At this point it is not clear what Morales might do to try to halt the autonomy referendum from going forward, but it is evident that the opposition believes it cannot be stopped.

GOLDBERG